

# Play for all



Colin MacAdam highlights the importance of promoting inclusive play

Play is a multifaceted component of a child's development; not only does it allow children to experience fun and excitement, develop their personalities and imagination but it also provides them with endless opportunities to understand and interpret the world around them. Children can develop a number of skills, including co-ordination, problem solving, interaction and communication. The value of play also extends to positive health and well-being.

In line with the Every Child Matters agenda, all children are entitled to full access to play provision, to an environment that adapts to the changing needs of all children rather than asking the child to 'fit in.'

Play providers hold a duty of care to all children; with one in five children in the UK with a special educational need (SEN) we must provide play environments that are inclusive. The most authentic play experience is child initiated, child powered and freely chosen; something that should be accessible to all children.

It is important for play providers to remember that play is a form of experiential education – a process of learning through action. Children do not want to be told or shown how to do something, they want to attempt it themselves so that they can learn from the experience.

## The Play Strategy

The Government's Play Strategy, launched in December 2008, is backed by £235 million of investment and pledges to install safe, welcoming and free play spaces for children and young people of all backgrounds and abilities.

Through this significant funding and dedication to the UK's state of play, barriers to play can be reduced substantially.

Many children experience both environmental and social barriers to play in their communities, whether this is at school or the local park. Many environmental obstacles that can affect a child's access to play include uneven surfaces and narrow gates. For a child who uses a wheelchair, the entrance to the playground must provide ample space to manoeuvre in and out, while the play surface must allow for the wheels to move smoothly. Consider making use of equipment already in place for able-bodied children; if stepping posts are positioned with consideration, they can become a slalom course for

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wheelchair and crutch users, offering an all-encompassing approach to inclusive play. An inclusive design is also more likely to meet the needs of future students not just the current cohort. Playgrounds should accommodate all requirements, not expect the child to 'fit' into the design.

Communication and language can also be potential physical barriers to play. A child who has visual impairments may be unable clearly to read the signs in the playground. It is important here to consider signs and notices that incorporate Braille or brightly coloured symbols. For example, an adventure trail that challenges children of all abilities could include a strip of yellow surfacing to mark the start and end of the trail – this is of great benefit to partially sighted children. Together, children can crawl, balance, scramble, climb, jump, wobble and swing, developing core stability and strength, as well as learning co-operative and social skills.

## Social barriers

Social challenges can often arise as a further obstacle to inclusive play for children with disabilities. Attitudes and actions of others can often be the cause of these children feeling isolated from their peers. Many report that it is not their impairment that disables them, but the surrounding world that denies them their right to freedom of play.

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Most importantly, children develop friendship groups and a sense of belonging when playing. If play providers can aid the interaction of all abilities and needs in open play spaces, then attitudes of exclusion and prejudice can be reduced.

Where there is a lack of understanding between different members of a community, play can be a positive, integrating factor. A sense of connection to, and participation in, community life underpins the development of citizenship among young people. The value of children simply enjoying spending time together in playful situations should not be underestimated. Aiming for inclusive play opportunities therefore takes us one step closer to a more inclusive society.

Ultimately, children of 'all ages, shapes and sizes' have an appetite to explore the world that surrounds them. It is our responsibility to set aside time for planning and developing inclusive settings that consider layout, resources and access for all children. We must be flexible, creative and sensitive in our approach; children of all abilities do not just want to play on playground equipment, they imaginatively inhabit the spaces the play environment provides.

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